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Barber, Ohio Columbus

The farmer's task in the world war

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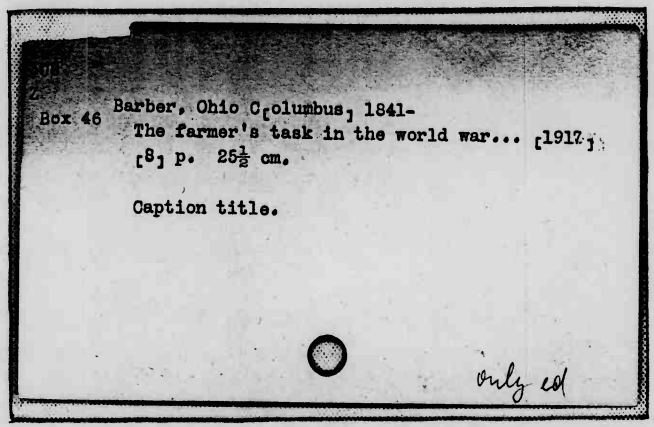

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The Farmer's Task in The World War

By OHIO C. BARBER, Akron, O.

Not the least of the dangers threatening America, now that we have entered the world war, is that of hunger. Lean days are ahead of us. Even though we may not be brought to actual want, we who have been the most prodigal of all the people of the world, must learn our lesson of economy. No longer may we waste $700,000,000 annually through our kitchens, as the Secretary of Agriculture charges we have been doing.

The increasing burden of high cost living has been felt more and more in these recent years, but never so keenly as at present. Prices of all the necessaries of life are soaring. Speculation in foodstuffs is being permitted without even an effective effort at interference by the government. The supplies of some farm products are all but exhausted.

And the worst is yet to come.

The American farmer is facing the most colossal task in all his experience. More will be expected of him this year than ever before. Not only will America look to him for sustenance, but the Allied armies of war-scourged Europe will depend upon him for their foodstuffs. Already he is being urged from every quarter from the Secretary of Agriculture down to the Agricultural Boards of our least productive states to utilize his every available acre for a greater planting than ever this spring. And he has never been less prepared to meet these demands.

His farms are largely worn out, for he has been taking much from his lands and giving back but little through many years of slipshod farming methods. Conditions right now are all combining to render it virtually impossible for him to remedy this one predominant weakness in time to realize upon it this year. And his winter wheat fields, already past the point of further assistance, are showing far below normal.

The European war has served to cut off the usual German potash supply. Inadequate ocean shipping facilities, together with the increased demand from the powder manufactories, have reduced the available supply of Chilean nitrate. These are the most effective elements in commercial fertilizers, which now contain less than one-tenth the potash and nitrate they carried three years ago, yet sell at higher prices than then. Railroad embargoes and the shortage of freight cars have prevented him from obtaining adequate supplies of domestic fertilizer. The effects of all this will be seen in the fall harvests. Moreover, with only about a month left for his spring planting, and little of his preliminary plowing done as yet, the ever present problem of farm help, now vastly intensified, seemingly is without solution.

And with these conditions in prosperous America, what is the situation with the world at large?

Quite recently the International Institute of Agriculture has been in session in Rome. The Institute, composed of agricultural experts from all the countries of the globe, is unquestionably the world's highest authority on crop conditions and food supplies. Its judgments are based upon the most complete and accurate data possible to obtain. And in forecasting the world's wheat crop for this year it estimates a shortage of at least 150,000,000 bushels. Personally I shall be much surprised if the shortage is not 300,000,000 bushels.

"The world's food crop is deficient and the situation is becoming alarming," is the warning the Institute has issued. And there is more behind that statement than appears upon its face.

This admonition applies to the United States quite as forcibly as to the world at large. Morally we are obliged to divide our loaf with the hungry millions across the seas. We are, for the time being, their blood brothers in the fight against Prussian militarism, ruthlessness and rapine. We must support them in a provision as well as a military way if our arms are to conquer and our ideals to prevail in the ultimate readjustment of world conditions. Our responsibility is very clearly defined in the world mind. It is not questioned here in America. There is no inclination with us to dodge any of our debts of honor. Already the forces of government at Washington are being put into motion to do our full duty toward Europe in the furnishing of food supplies for her soldiery. But for us all it will mean herculean effort and supreme sacrifice in the months to come.

Nor can we count too confidently upon Europe fully holding up her end of the food fight. Europe is willing but woefully weak right now. With only men of extreme age, the women and the children to till the farms, an over-abundant yield can hardly be expected this year, even with the most favorable of natural conditions. Unfortunately these conditions are not propitious for, according to all reports, Europe is experiencing the most backward spring in 40 years. Much of the Allied armies' breadstuffs must of necessity come from the wheat and corn lands of the Americas. Canada, the United States and the Argentine must supply the deficiencies. Canada may be counted upon to do her part, although she too is handicapped by the lack of farm help and is advertising this early an offer of $60 a month for farm laborers. Recent developments in the Argentine make problematical just how heartily she may co-operate. And at best the combined wheat crops of both countries is but a little more than half as much as that of the United States under normal conditions, so in the end the great burden of the task will fall upon us.

Considering all these points the outlook for the United States is not the most flattering. From the viewpoint of the Department of Agriculture, the promise from the American farm is anything but encouraging for a bumper wheat crop this year. The department's latest issued bulletin, prepared only after the most painstaking investigation by the Bureau of Farm Estimates, showed that the condition of winter wheat on April 1 was only 63.4 per cent of normal. Should winter wheat make no improvement upon this showing by harvest time it would mean a production but slightly in excess of 300,000,000 bushels. This is a decidedly disquieting situation, when one considers the prospective demands of Europe and the ever present possibility of a disappointing crop of spring wheat.

The reports of the Department of Agriculture show that for a number of years past, the winter wheat crop has been on the average about double that of the spring wheat. And for the last ten years the average annual wheat production of the United States has been approximately 725,000,000 bushels. This means that the winter wheat crop for the last decade has shown an average annually of about 480,000,000 bushels, and that if this year's crop in the harvest shows no better than 63.4 per cent of normal the winter wheat crop will but slightly exceed 302,000,000 bushels. The aggregate crop then, providing spring wheat shows a normal production, will not exceed 545,000,000 bushels.

How woefully inadequate such a production would be to meet the combined needs of the United States and the hungry European allied nations can be judged from the fact that in 1914-1915, the opening year of the great conflict, our wheat exports from our domestic production totaled 332,464,976 bushels. Last year we exported 243,097,000 bushels, and since June, 1916, a period of eight months, our exports have been 135,491,000 bushels, despite the menace of unrestricted U-boat warfare during a portion of that time. During the last ten years the average annual exportation has been 152,440,996 bushels.

And during these same ten years the average annual consumption in the United States has been in excess of 572,000,000 bushels!

This is 27,000,000 bushels more than our possible production this year, though it is some 12,000,000 bushels more than our consumption in 1915. For some unaccountable reason, which the government statistics make no effort to explain, the American wheat consumption varies surprisingly. In 1906 the home consumption totaled 595,000,000 bushels. In 1908 it dropped to 471,000,000 bushels, and in 1914 it jumped to 617,700,000 bushels. Our greatest annual consumption was 649,824,682 bushels in 1910.

Of all the world's wheat-eating population the people of the United States stand second in their individual requirements. The American eats something more than five and a half bushels of wheat annually. The Frenchman leads the world with an average of eight bushels. Of all the European peoples Russia requires the least per capita, two and one-half bushels. As early as 1898 Sir William Crookes, president of the British Association for the Advancement of Science, estimated that the wheat-eaters of the world required an average of 4½ bushels each annually.

So if we are to supply wheat to Europe in any considerable quantity from this year's production there must be sharp and effective retrenchment in our own consumption.

Inevitably this means continued high prices for wheat and flour. Such conditions produce tremendous speculative chances of which advantage is certain to be taken by those who gamble in foodstuffs to the country-wide detriment and public hardship and without effective curbing by the government. And high prices of wheat and corn forecast with equal certainty exorbitant prices for meats and milk.

It has been a generally accepted rule in the past that 60-cent corn meant $6.00 hogs, and proportionately up or down. And 16-cent pork will mean 32-cent bacon and hams. Today corn is selling around $1.35 a bushel, while pork in the Chicago stockyards has been bringing as high as $16.00. Should these high grain prices continue the ultimate effect will be to discourage disastrously the raising of hogs. Two years ago, on my own farm, I had in excess of 1,000 hogs. It had been my intention to raise hogs upon an extensive scale, but I speedily discovered that the rapidly increasing prices of feed stuffs would shortly render the industry profitless. The result is that I have abandoned hog-raising for the present. Meantime I have been able to continue the operation of my packing house with a much improved showing of profit by buying my pork on the open market at prevailing prices.

As the high prices of grain affect hog raising, so it will affect the beef market and cattle raising. It has long been the practice of the larger producers of beef cattle to hold them upon the prairies of the southwest until they have reached a certain size and age. Then they either ship them to Kansas, Iowa or Nebraska to fatten them for the markets by corn feeding, or sell them outright to the big corn growers of those states who would do this. This was a profitable procedure so long as corn was at the local normal price of from 45 to 60 cents a bushel. But it becomes a decidedly different problem when corn is selling at from $1.25 to $1.35 a bushel and liable to go even higher. In another year we will be paying considerably higher prices for a decidedly poorer quality of beef.

Much in the same fashion it will affect the dairy interests, with the result that milk, cream, butter and cheese prices all will climb higher. Upon my farm I have something more than 700 cattle, 500 of them being

pure blood Guernseys, the others about equally divided between Holsteins, Jerseys, Herefords and Brown Swiss, all high class animals. The Guernseys constitute probably the largest herd of this strain in all the world, and represent an investment of something near $300,000. Many of them I imported with a view to building up just such a herd as I now have. For several years past my best cows have been closely approaching or breaking the best Guernsey records for milk and butter production. Their milk carries in excess of 5 per cent of butter fat, where the usual municipal requirement is three per cent, and at a uniform price of 15 cents a quart for milk I cannot profitably maintain this herd and provide mill feed at the present prices.

Nor can the average dairy farmer continue to maintain his dairy interests and pay the existing prices for feedstuffs without loss. He will be forced to demand a higher price for his product and in turn the general public, always the ultimate consumer, will shoulder the burden. So unless the government exercises a decisively sharper control over the speculative tendencies of our foodstuff and grain gamblers than it has ever dared attempt heretofore there will be gray days of the strictest privation for America long before this war has ended and conditions been restored to a normal state. And with the manifold new demands upon their time and attention, consequent to the daily war developments, the departments of investigation and prosecution seem scheduled for an extremely busy season, and the public will pay the price of their past procrastination and inaction.

Yet these are not by any means the greatest of the farmer's troubles. Unquestionably his paramount problem is the question of farm help. Go into whatever section of agricultural America you may and you will find the same condition. The young man is leaving the farm in greater numbers annually. Chiefly at this particular time he is lured by the high wages paid in the industrial plants of the cities, the rubber factories, the munitions plants and the iron and steel works. There he can make from $4.00 to $5.00 a day to begin with, and when he has mastered his task he can materially increase that earning. The result is that the farmer, his father, often past the day of his best efforts in the field, is left to do the work of the farm in the best way he can, too often poorly and unprofitably.

Last summer I was forced to pay $2.50 a day for common farm labor and in some instances it was necessary to feed these workers in addition. Only a few years ago the farm wage was $40.00 a month. Even at the present high prices of farm products the average unsystematized farm cannot stand such a wage rate. The farmer who attempts to pay it will find himself a loser at the end of the season. As long as he is able to hold his boys on the farm he may make a handsome profit, but not longer.

There are any number of farms in my immediate neighborhood that have been robbed of their boys by the rubber industry of Akron. These rubber plants employ something like 60,000 men. One alone employs more than 20,000 and could use 5,000 more were they available. And the wage average is better than $4.00 a day. Dozens of these farmers who have been deserted by their sons would be happy to be able to realize $4.00 a day from their labor on the farms. Not one of them can afford to hire help at the prevailing wages. So while the industrial system is a good thing for the boys, at least temporarily, it is a constantly growing menace to the agricultural prosperity of the country.

Nor is this the only drain which threatens the youth of the farmlands. Now that the government is planning to raise an army of a million men, which ultimately may become three millions, the farm will be hit harder than ever unless special provision is made for exempting the farmer boy from service. Incidentally such an exemption might have the effect of sending many of them skurrying back from the factories to the plow, although it would not dampen the farm boy's patriotism or prevent the enlistment of any to whom the appeal of adventure was strong.

This initial American army should be recruited from the industries. It would be immeasureably better were the factories to be forced to surrender their employes to the country's martial needs than to draw further upon the already sadly depleted ranks of the farm help. Older men may do the work of the factories if need be, Industrial help can readily be replaced. But long experience has proved conclusively that it is no easy task to replenish the waning supply of efficient farm labor. Husbandry is one of the most ancient of callings but is by no means the easiest to master, and under the old system it has been strangely lacking in appeal to the younger generation of America.

Much was expected by the American farmer a few years ago from the establishment of the information and employment bureau by the Department of Commerce and Labor at Washington. This bureau was planned to co-operate with the different state employment bureaus in furnishing immigrant help to the farmers of the country at large. But to the farmer in general it has been wholly disappointing. The records of the department show that during the first five years of its activities, with an aggregate immigration of more than 5,000,000 to draw upon, farmers and common laborers greatly predominating, the bureau was instrumental in directing a total of only 28,925 immigrants to employment. And by no means all of these went to the farms.

Under normal conditions the immigrant might very profitably be utilized to increase enormously the farm production, but with immigration reduced to the minimum, as it is today, practically no relief at all may be expected from that direction. The immigrant is as susceptible as the farmer boy to the bright lights of the city. He prefers the congested district, the tenement, his kind, and the most menial service, to the freedom of the open air and the independence of the country. So he herds in the cities, becomes a consumer instead of a producer, and an added burden to the country that welcomes him. It is a condition for which some regulation should be found.

So the fact that looms largest from the farmer's viewpoint is that he must have help and lots of it, if he is to meet the demands of the coming fall and winter. It is absolutely imperative. There is no substitute. There is work to be done far in excess of the ordinary, and though he may possibly facilitate matters somewhat by the purchase of improved farming machinery, at war prices, providing he has the price, someone must yet run the machine. The government may come to his rescue by requiring compulsory farm service in some manner yet to be determined, a plan that is already being considered. And he may be given more liberal financial aid than Uncle Sam originally contemplated.

Farm loans, however, will not of themselves prove sufficient, for too few farmers will risk under existing conditions the uncertainties of the times. Farm loans might be stimulated somewhat by government guarantee of a minimum price for farm products, but hardly otherwise. And while Congress is fixing a minimum price for farm products it should protect the public as well by fixing maximum prices for the principal foodstuffs and new and more drastic methods of dealing with the food gamblers who in the past have always succeeded in slipping out of federal fingers with the elusive ability of so many eels.

It is not to be considered that women will go into the fields, and the 6,000,000 or more school children between the ages of nine and sixteen years will probably be engaged largely in the vacant lot gardening movement which is now taking wonderful impetus everywhere. Of these children possibly a third could be utilized upon the farms. The child labor law

were enacted chiefly with a view to keeping children out of the factories where the confinement, the rigid application to machine work and unsanitary conditions served in combined effect to stunt both their physical and mental development. It is hardly to be presumed that there could be any aggressive opposition to their employment in the most healthful of all outdoor pursuits where the inevitable result would be a stimulation to a tremendous degree of their interest in agricultural training. Such employment of itself would result in a vigorous recruiting of candidates for future agricultural honors.

No farm assistance whatever can be expected from the factories. There is no prospect of such falling off in industrial activity as would release any considerable number of men therefrom. And otherwise they will never go to the farm. The real danger is that factory outputs will not meet the urgent demands of the times. Yet the factories might furnish relief in both directions were it possible in this emergency to impress upon the workmen of the country the wisdom of increasing production in all lines by temporarily adopting a working day of longer hours. The eight-hour law established for the railroads is not without its extenuating features even under existing conditions, for there the big element of the safeguarding of human lives becomes an impressive factor. But there is grave danger of its quickly reacting upon the factories as well, to the greater reduction of output and the rendering necessary of a still greater number of workmen to accomplish the present day tasks. And with the situation that now confronts us this is not to be considered. Instead much could be accomplished toward the solution of our present employment problems were a ten-hour workday to be adopted by unanimous consent for at least the period of this war. This alone would release something more than 20 per cent of the factory employes for military and farm service in this greatest emergency the country has ever known.

The Secretary of Agriculture has recently advocated the utilization of the tillable portions of the public lands. This doubtless will prove possible only when the government empties the federal prisons of their inmates and transplants them to these tillable tracts to perform a service far more useful then any with which they may now be employed behind prison walls. And the several states may profitably follow suit in this same direction by putting their convicts out to farm work under such conditions and with such safeguards as may be necessary and can be devised without great effort. Many of the states already have extensive land holdings whereon this plan could be readily and profitably carried out. Practically all of them have proved by actual experiment that their wards in the various institutions for the insane and feeble minded may, to an extensive degree, be safely and profitably employed at farm labor with real mental and physical benefits to these unfortunates. This system without doubt is possible of extension.

However, resort to the virgin government land reservations is really unnecessary. Moreover, it is impracticable upon such short notice. In most instances these lands are far removed from the railroads, a condition which would seriously interfere with the handling of initial supplies or harvested crops. And they will first have to be put into condition before crops may be sowed. This of itself is a season's task, as any practical farmer, who has attempted to break in virgin farm lands, will concede. Coming from governmental sources in Washington, the suggestion is high sounding and comforting, and bespeaks a keen alertness upon the part of the government officials, yet when analyzed it is found to be wholly without real worth.

If the government statistics are at all reliable, there is no need to lose time searching for and developing virgin farm territory in remote places. There is more untilled land within the farm boundaries of America right now than we can take care of even were the government to raise an army of farm hands by conscription.

According to the federal census of 1910 there were 878,798,325 acres of farm lands in the United States.

Only 478,451,750 acres of these were under cultivation.

More than 400,000,000 acres were lying idle!

So if properly supplied with farm help, and cultivated as the American farmer can cultivate his lands, there is sufficient farm territory ready at hand to meet our present emergency or any world emergency that may ever arise.

But there has never been sufficient help to work it all. Nor has there been need for the working. The American farmer frequently has raised more than he could sell profitably. Only in seasons of reduced production has he failed to meet all requirements from these 478,451,750 acres under cultivation in 1910.

And while in many instances he has been barely ekeing out an existence from his farm work, save in comparatively recent years, he has been neglecting his domain and his once fertile acres have been steadily deteriorating. The result is that to a surprisingly large degree the farms of the country are worn out, depleted of fertility, robbed of their sustenance by constant repetition of crops, and become arid through soil erosion.

The best proof of this is by a comparison of the productiveness of the farms of the several European countries with those of America. According to the last census the ten-year average wheat yield in France was 22 bushels to the acre, in Hungary, 19 bushels; Italy, 20 bushels; Great Britian, 33 bushels; Germany, 29 bushels, and Denmark, 40 bushels. Even with the crudest of farming methods, the Russian peasant averaged 8 bushels.

And the average for the United States was 14 bushels.

Other farm products showed approximately the same ratio of advantage for the European agriculturist, and while different agricultural methods unquestionably affected the final showings the chief causes of these surprising differences lay in the greater fertility of the foreign soil, produced by a more liberal use of commercial fertilizers. For the European farmer goes at his work in a scientific way; he has learned the lesson of expedient fertilizing, and he no longer depends wholly upon his farm manures as a cure for all soil evils.

A surprisingly large percentage of American farmers have yet to learn this. Every state in the Union has its agricultural experiment stations, ready at all times to lend the farmer assistance in solving his soil problems. Yet the ratio of inquiries to the number of farmers is astonishingly low. At every railroad station in rural Ohio is posted an announcement from the Ohio agricultural experiment station citing the beneficial results from fertilizer experiments in several sections of the state, and soliciting opportunities to co-operate with farmers who have troublesome problems. Yet too many Ohio farmers, like the farmers of every other state, still regard wheat raising as a matter of chance rather than of science.

Much concern has been manifested recently by government and railroad officials regarding the eventual movement of export foodstuffs to Atlantic ports. The railroad managers have assured the government that everything possible will be done to facilitate shipments and that food consignments will be given precedence over all other freight. It might be well at this time for both the government and the railroads to consider the case of the farmer, whose immediate needs are for fertilizers, the domestic phosphates and agricultural limes, the bone meals and tankage, and such other commercial fertilizers as the limited supplies of potash and nitrate

make it possible for the manufacturers to produce. For unless the farmlands are revived with some of the sustenance of which they have been systematically robbed through the long years of haphazard and unscientific farming methods, there will be no greater call than usual upon the railroads for special provision for the movement of farm products the coming autumn.

Certainly so far this year the railroads have shown the farmer but scant consideration. In saying this I speak from personal experience. Months ago I ordered 1,500 tons of high grade agricultural lime for my farm of approximately 3,500 acres in Summit County, Ohio. This lime was then ready for shipment at the manufacturing plant in an adjoining county less than 40 miles away by direct rail route.

In four months I have been able to get just 150 tons of it.

As a final resort appeal was made to the Ohio state utilities commission. The plant is only just beginning to get the cars that may permit its distributing an output of something more than 20,000 tons in time for the farmers of Ohio to make use of it for this year's crops.

Yet meantime the railroads have been experiencing no noticeable shortage of cars for the shipment of munitions to the eastern seaports. Hundreds of munition plants, scattered widely over the country, have been working day and night upon rush contracts for the Allies. They have been using countless thousands of tons of raw steel daily and turning out a finished product upon the same tremendous scale. All of which meant enormous daily shipments both to and from the plants.

The railroads have met the demands of these munition-makers virtually without exception. They have subordinated every other consideration to that end.

But they cannot find cars enough to permit the distribution of necessary farm supplies at the most critical period of foodstuff demands that the country has ever experienced.

Official Washington is reported to be extremely busy at present with plans for a fleet of jitney freighters for rushing foodstuffs to Europe; with railroad presidents and the American Railway Association outlining a campaign for swift movement of farm products and munitions to the coast; and with a back-to-the-farm movement almost as pretentious as the task of raising the proposed army of a million men.

But unless Washington officialdom awakens to the imperative needs of the farmer, both in the way of men and farm supplies, we are likely to make a poor job of our already accepted task of feeding the Allied armies next winter.

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